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ABSTRACT

This report describes "Philadelphia's Grand Experiment" in comprehensive school district reform, from its conception through its initial months of implementation. In 2001, as part of the remedy for low student performance, the governor ordered the state to take over governance of the Philadelphia School District, with a substantial number of schools placed under private management. A total of 70 low-performing schools experienced significant change in their governance, and another 16 that had shown improvement were given additional funds to continue their successful initiatives on their own. Thirty schools were randomly assigned to three for-profit providers. Local nonprofit groups chose low-performing schools located near their sites. Against this backdrop of sweeping, district-wide reforms, a wide range of school-based experiments emerged. Nationally, there is public interest in the 70 partnerships schools, which include nonprofit and for-profit education for management organizations (EMOs). The partnerships involve restructured schools; Edison Schools, Inc.; Chancellor Beacon Academies; Victory Schools; universal companies; Foundations, Inc.; the University of Pennsylvania; Temple University; and charter schools. The reforms fall into five categories: curriculum and instruction, staffing and leadership configurations, student motivation and behavior management, extra academic help for students, and facilities improvements. (SM)

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# COMPREHENSIVE DISTRICT REFORM: PHILADELPHIA'S GRAND EXPERIMENT

**Elizabeth Useem and Robert Balfanz**

**Benchmarks**
**Volume 4, Issue 1**
**Winter 2002**
**The Quarterly Newsletter of the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform**

**National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform**
**Washington, DC**

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# Benchmarks

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## Comprehensive District Reform: Philadelphia's Grand Experiment

By Elizabeth Useem and Robert Balfanz

With new pressures to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP)—the minimum level of improvement school districts and schools must achieve every year as outlined by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation—state and local education agencies throughout the nation are seeking reform strategies to help their struggling schools improve. Recently, the radical plan of one school district, the District of Philadelphia, to address the new federal requirements within NCLB and to improve student achievement, has generated overwhelming national interest.

The scale and methods of Philadelphia's reform plan are at the core of this widespread fascination. In September 2002, Philadelphia embarked on an improvement plan that placed seventy of its two hundred sixty-four schools under treatment. All eyes are on Philadelphia as these schools' stories unfold.

To bring up-to-date information to the education community, this issue of NCCSR *Benchmarks* describes "Philadelphia's Grand Experiment"—from its conception, through its initial months of implementation. The authors of this edition, Elizabeth Useem and Robert Balfanz, have been deeply involved in comprehensive school reform (CSR) in Philadelphia throughout the past decade. Dr. Useem (buseem@philaedfund.org), who has been working in Philadelphia for ten years, is director of research and evaluation at the Philadelphia Education Fund. Dr. Balfanz (rbalfanz@csos.jhu.edu), going on his seventh year working with Philadelphia schools, is currently a research scientist and co-director of Talent Development Middle Schools at the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR).



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## Introduction

Implementation of one of the most radical district-wide school reform efforts in the nation's history began this fall in Philadelphia. In December 2001, Pennsylvania Governor Mark Schweiker declared the 198,000-student District to be fiscally and academically distressed and ordered the state to take over governance of the system. The governor replaced the District's mayor-appointed Board of Education in January with a School Reform Commission (SRC), a 5-member entity with three members appointed by the governor and two by the mayor.

As part of the remedy for low student performance, the governor instructed the SRC to place a substantial number of schools under private management or to impose other forms of radical changes in their governance and operation. As a result, Philadelphia is now the site of the most significant experiment to date to test whether low-performing schools will improve more if they are governed by national for-profit firms, local non-profit organizations or by the School District itself in a restructured sub-district.*

When Philadelphia schools opened their doors in September 2002, 86 of the District's 264 schools had become subject to an assortment of extensive management and curricular interventions. A portion of new funds ($37.5 million) allocated to the District by the city and the state was targeted to these schools. Of the 86 "Partnership Schools," 45 were being run by seven private for-profit and non-profit entities. Another 21 schools, first dubbed "reconstituted" and now called "Restructured," were singled out to be in a separate sub-district within the system. Four schools, to their surprise, were put on the road to becoming self-governing public charter schools. At first, another four schools were slated to become "independent," but the meaning of that term was never defined, and those schools eventually were placed in other "treatment" categories.

Altogether, then, 70 schools designated as "low performing" experienced significant change in their governance. Another 16 low-performing schools that had shown improvement were given additional funds ($550 per pupil) to continue their successful initiatives on their own. High schools and K-4 schools were not included in the intervention plan for the first year.

School District staff, working under the direction of the School Reform Commission, assigned 30 schools, more or less at random, to the three for-profit providers—Edison Schools, Inc., Chancellor Beacon Academies, and Victory Schools. For the most part, the local non-profit groups—two universities, a large community development organization, and an education reform non-profit—chose low-performing schools that were located in the geographic areas of the city where they had long been active. The rationale for the assignment of other schools to be "restructured" or to be converted to charter schools was never clearly enunciated by the School Reform Commission.

The result of the hurried and haphazard process of matching schools to interventions resulted, somewhat serendipitously, in a situation that approximates a natural randomized experiment testing the effectiveness of differing models of school change. While the models' constantly evolving and multiple components make it impossible to view this situation as a true randomized trial, Philadelphia's educational arena today is about as close as researchers can get to experimental research on school effectiveness in a turbulent big-city school system.

The governor's initial plan, outlined in the summer and fall of 2001, called for even more sweeping changes: a takeover of the District's central office

*Additional models for change are found in the District's 45 independent public charter schools that enroll 20,000 children.

operations by an array of private firms, chief of which was Edison Schools, Inc.; privatization of up to 100 schools with as many as 60 going to Edison; and contracts with community groups to collaborate in the management of all of the privatized ("partnership") schools. This plan, however, was modified during the period from January to September of 2002, first by the School Reform Commission and then by the new chief executive officer (CEO), Paul Vallas, who arrived on the scene from Chicago in July. The SRC moved away from awarding so many schools to Edison and other private managers after vocal and sustained protests by student and community advocacy groups, media pressure, and the opposition of the two mayor-appointed members of the SRC. Vallas, seasoned by years of work in public finance and a six-year CEO-ship of Chicago's public schools, took charge quickly in July and made it clear that he was in command of *all* the schools and the central operations of the system.

The "final" plan that emerged reduced the number of privatized schools from up to 100 down to 45; assigned only 20 schools to Edison (an action that caused Edison's stock to plunge below a dollar); eliminated the plan to have Edison play the lead consultant role in District planning ("That's what *I'm* here for" said Vallas to the *Philadelphia Daily News*); halted plans to award a number of contracts to other private vendors for central office functions; and, without saying so, appeared to abandon the idea of giving contracts to community groups to assist with school services. Vallas, a non-ideological pragmatist, served notice that he would cancel contracts for education management organizations (EMOs) and charter school managers whose schools performed poorly. His skill in handling the ticklish politics involved in awarding contracts to the EMOs and the garnering of more aid from the state for schools other than those run by Edison drew praise from community groups and civic leaders.

Vallas quickly laid out his own bold plans for District-wide changes, drawing attention away from the fate of the 70 Partnership Schools to the needs of the system as a whole. Vallas' priorities include:

- additional time for student learning, including mandatory extended-day programs and summer school for low-performing students;
- conversion of most of the District's 42 middle schools to K-8 schools;
- high school initiatives including construction of 9 new high schools, creation of more magnet schools and programs, reduced enrollments in existing high schools, and the addition of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs in many more high schools;
- extensive renovations in existing schools, including improvements in air and water quality in school buildings;
- expansion of early childhood programs, including screening for vision, hearing, and respiratory problems;
- a uniform discipline code with accurate reporting of infractions; a halt in transfers of violent students to other schools; more referrals to disciplinary programs; and a crackdown on truancy;
- a stepped-up teacher recruitment and retention effort;
- more specific and consistent curricular guidance for teachers;
- a reconfigured budget that reduces waste and redirects money to the classroom; and
- aggressive efforts to find funds for the District from external sources.

## Implementation of the Diverse Provider Model

Against this backdrop of sweeping District-wide reforms, a wide-ranging and still evolving set of school-based experiments has begun to roll out this fall. While the local eye is focused more on Paul Vallas' plans for the entire District, national interest is centered on the experiments in the 70 Partnership Schools. Schools run by the for-profit EMOs receive between $803 to $881 more per pupil; the non-profit EMO's get about $650 per student; Restructured Schools secured $550 more per pupil; and the two universities providing services receive $450 per student. The ever-changing plans for these schools (nothing about this reform is simple) currently look something like the following descriptions:

**Restructured Schools**
(21 schools)

These District-run schools have a mandated core curriculum and extended periods for reading, mathematics, and science; close monitoring of teachers' instruction; a wealth of new textbooks and materials; and intensive professional development, including on-site coaching from master teachers and four hours a month of training during school hours. Students in both the elementary and middle grades are taught by one teacher in self-contained classrooms (although a few middle schools have two or three-person teams). Principals in eight of the schools were removed and replaced with new leadership, and all schools were given an assistant principal regardless of school size. Teachers were given the option to transfer out of the school but principals could not force teachers to leave. A parent-run Restructured School Advisory Board is being formed.

**Edison Schools, Inc.**
(for-profit EMO; 20 schools)

The most closely watched of the EMOs, Edison has stressed the implementation of a core curriculum including the use of the Success for All reading program and Everyday Mathematics in the elementary grades; new textbooks and materials in core subjects; summer and ongoing training for teachers and administrators; frequent feedback to teachers and parents from monthly "benchmark assessments" on student progress; and a student behavior management system, including a two-week course on team building and discipline rules at the start of the school year. Edison eliminated the positions of most non-teaching assistants (NTAs), some school secretaries, and some librarians in order to reallocate additional resources to the classroom. The company also removed the existing principals in eight of its 20 schools.


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**Chancellor Beacon Academies**
(for-profit EMO; 5 schools)

The company has undertaken a semester-long planning process with no significant changes planned until mid-year. Improvements will focus on professional development for teachers, improving relationships with parents, literacy initiatives, and facilities upgrades.

**Victory Schools**
(for-profit EMO; 5 schools)

Victory is implementing single-sex classes in the two middle schools; an intense focus on reading and writing using Direct Instruction as a component of a Balanced Literacy program and the Step-Up to Writing program; extensive teacher training; ongoing support for teachers through the use of school-based coaches; strict disciplinary codes; facility improvements; and extra help after school for students who need it.

**Universal Companies**
(non-profit organization;
2 schools and 1 charter school)

School reform efforts are enmeshed in a larger community development effort that includes adult educational opportunities as well as workforce and housing development. The schools' initiative stresses strong business and faith-based partnerships; parent involvement efforts; connections to community-based arts groups; blending of African American studies into some of the core courses; imaginative incentives for learning; and programs for high-achieving students. The elementary curriculum includes use of Everyday Mathematics, the Full Option Science System (FOSS), and the 100 Book Challenge. The middle school program continues the Johns Hopkins Talent Development model that includes Everyday Mathematics for sixth graders, University of Chicago Math for seventh and eighth graders, the FOSS science program, and Student Team Reading and Writing.

**Foundations, Inc.**
(non-profit education reform
organization; 5 schools)

Foundations-run elementary schools have classes of 17 in the lower grades; flexible scheduling; an emphasis on phonics in the reading program; professional development for teachers; stipends for teachers to mentor a group of eight students each before and after school (with additional payments if these students show achievement growth);



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biweekly reports of progress in reading and mathematics for students who are significantly behind grade level; programs on character and community building; and enhanced parent involvement activities. The middle school program at one school continues the Talent Development model.

**University of Pennsylvania**
(3 schools)

The university is not managing the schools but is advising and providing services in areas directly related to instruction. These include curriculum; leadership and professional development; student assessment and academic support; and school climate, including parent involvement. Faculty at the schools commit to 120 hours of yearly professional development, much of which is offered at the university's Graduate School of Education.

**Temple University**
(5 schools)

Like Penn, Temple is not directly managing its Partnership Schools but will provide technical assistance. Temple is preparing to launch a whole-school reform process that will focus on principal leadership development and teacher training and coaching. Managed from the President's office, this initiative will draw on resources from all parts of the university: the College of Education will provide tuition-free coursework and other professional development for school staff; the facilities department will assist with building evaluation and clean-up; and Temple's library experts will help assess and update school libraries.

**Charter Schools**
(4 schools—one fully chartered;
3 "transitional charters")

These schools are, or will be, run by an independent board in collaboration with education partners (e.g. universities, non-profits, EMOs) and one or more community groups. Once fully chartered, staff will no longer be District employees or members of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Three of the four schools are working with Johns Hopkins University's Talent Development comprehensive school reform model.



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## Dimensions of the Natural Random Experiment

The reforms undertaken by the partner groups fall into five general categories: curriculum and instruction; staffing and leadership configurations; student motivation and behavior management; extra academic help for students; and facilities improvements. The management groups are betting on varying practices within those categories to improve school performance. Since 25 of the 30 middle schools with student poverty levels of over 80 percent are in the experimental category, the impact of the changes on that school level will be of particular importance.

In the area of curriculum and instruction, for example, the Restructured Schools are significantly increasing instructional time in English/language arts and math (and eventually science) at the expense of other subjects and electives. Edison, however, places a premium on its electives (art, music, etc.), while Victory is placing heavy emphasis on reading.

On the climate/motivation side, Victory is putting its faith in single-sex classes; Foundations, in teacher mentors and advocates; Edison, in a two-week school-wide good-behavior curriculum; the Restructured Schools, in self-contained classes with close teacher-student bonds and little hallway movement; and Universal, in its 100 African-American Men volunteers.

When it comes to providing extra help for struggling students, the Partnership Schools using the Talent Development comprehensive school reform model (described in the next section) schedule that additional support during the school day, whereas several partner groups are betting more on after-school and Saturday programs.

Variations in staffing models exist as well. For example, a number of Restructured Schools and Edison schools have new principals. Victory Schools, with its emphasis on reading, is hiring only elementary-certified teachers for its middle schools rather than subject specialists. The Restructured model relies on teacher generalists as well, even in seventh and eighth grade classes. The middle schools that have retained the Talent Development program stress the importance of subject-matter specialists. Edison relies on school-based teacher leaders who have additional responsibility and receive extra pay.

As of November 2002, only scattered evidence exists about the success of the reforms since September. Contracts between the external managers and the District were not signed until late in the summer, leaving little time to orchestrate a smooth school opening. Some schools, particularly middle schools run by Edison, Inc., experienced higher-than-normal staff turnover and some disruption, caused in part by Edison's decision to remove NTAs and the fact that Edison was awarded some of lowest performing middle schools with the most dysfunctional climates in the District. Overall, however, reports by the District officials and the press indicate that school opening went reasonably well.

The District's research office is conducting an intensive round of school "inspections" this academic year and will administer standardized tests in both the fall and spring of this year as well. An external consortium of scholars, led by Philadelphia-based Research for Action, has begun a multi-year research project examining key dimensions of the reform.

## The Fate of Pre-existing Comprehensive School Reform Initiatives: The Case of Talent Development Middle Schools

Partnership Schools that had undertaken comprehensive school reform (CSR), receiving federal three-year CSR grants in the near-past or present, had to

negotiate with their new managers to maintain their reform models. The outcome was uncertain for months, in part because of the lag between the April announcement of the partnership pairings and the August 1 (or later) signing of actual contracts with the external managers.

Prior to this August, the Talent Development Middle School reform initiative was the most widely adopted comprehensive middle school reform model in the District, operating in 12 of the District's 43 middle schools during 2001-02. This model includes a core academic curriculum for all children; teacher teams for small groups of children; a three-tiered professional development support system for teachers including summer training, after-school and Saturday workshops, and on-site subject-specific coaching; and in-school extra-help opportunities for students in reading and math.

During the early spring months when the School Reform Commission was considering its plan to assign schools to managers, supporters of the model at Johns Hopkins and their allies at the Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF) argued aggressively for a separate network of Talent Development schools to be run as a quasi-autonomous sub-district within the larger District. The Network would also have included the five comprehensive high schools (now eight) that had adopted the Talent Development high school model. This proposal enjoyed substantial District and school-level support. Indeed, all of the 12 schools, regardless of whether they had been working with the model for seven years or just one year, expressed a strong desire to continue with the model.

Faced with intense political pressure from the governor and state's secretary of education (who still controlled crucial purse strings), the majority of the SRC members felt compelled to privatize a large number of schools and thus did not support the proposal by PEF and Hopkins to create a District-controlled Talent Development Network. The exemption of high schools and K-4 schools from takeover virtually assured the assignment of almost all high-poverty middle schools to the takeover list even though some of the schools on it had already been improving with the Talent Development program. Additionally, the fact that the District's criteria for assignment of schools to the takeover list weighted standardized test scores from two years prior more heavily than other indicators meant that recent gains were not counted as much. (This led to the strange circumstance of successfully reforming schools that had received cash awards from the state finding themselves on the low-performing list of schools.)

As a result of SRC actions, the 12 Talent Development middle schools, some of which had been implementing the model for three or more years, were scattered into no less than seven different "treatment" categories:

- Central East Middle School, the model's successful national prototype since 1995, was told it would become an independent charter school. Johns Hopkins, PEF, and Foundations, Inc. won the effort to become the partner group for the charters, which meant the Talent Development model would continue there. After teachers in the four schools designated as charters threatened to transfer or resign if they were removed from the protections of being District employees and union members, the SRC agreed to let three of them, including Central East, remain in the District for at least another year albeit only "thinly managed" by the system.

- Ada Lewis Middle School was assigned to Foundations, Inc., a non-profit that is supporting further implementation of the Talent Development model;

- Peirce Middle School and Vare Middle School (as a charter) are now under Universal Companies' management, a group that has pledged to enhance implementation of the model.

- Tilden Middle School and Penn Treaty Middle School went to Edison Schools, Inc. Corporate officials made the decision to abandon the model on the grounds that the additional money they got from the District (about $850 per student) was not enough to implement their full program along with the Talent Development program that cost about $300 per pupil. It is possible that new test score data showing Tilden's strong achievement gains during 2001-02, its first year with the model, may lead to a return to the Talent Development program.

- Clemente Middle School and Shoemaker Middle School were assigned to Chancellor Beacon Academy. Like Edison, Chancellor Beacon made a corporate decision to drop the model. Clemente has retained the extra-help math and reading labs set up by Talent Development.

- Roosevelt Middle School, placed in the Restructured category, was forced to abandon the model because the 21 Restructured Schools were required to use the same text series regardless of the success they might have been having with other curricula. In recent weeks, however, the school has supplemented its literacy program with use of the novels it had formerly used under Talent Development. The school has also retained the belief that middle grades teachers need to be subject-matter specialists, using teams of two teachers per group of students rather than just one teacher in a self-contained classroom.

- Cooke Middle School was one of only five schools removed from the original takeover list because it had very large achievement gains two years in a row on multiple measures. It was awarded additional funds to continue its reform efforts.

- Beeber Middle School and Strawberry Mansion Middle School were left alone. The former had high-enough scores and the latter appears to have been overlooked since it was attached to a high school.

In sum, after all the negotiations ceased, seven of the 12 middle schools that had adopted Talent Development were allowed to continue with the model. Achievement data from this and following years will provide evidence of the wisdom of these decisions.

## Hopes and Fears

Despite the tumult and confusion of the last year, city residents have grown more hopeful about the possibility of school improvement. They appear relieved that political bickering, fiscal crises, and leadership shuffles have abated.

All parties realize, of course, that it will take more than hope and a new charismatic CEO to bring about lasting and meaningful changes in the system. Philadelphia's schools have long been under-funded by the state of Pennsylvania, a state that ranks near the bottom nationally in equitable funding across school districts. The scarcity of funds may prevent full implementation of Paul Vallas' plan for change. Protracted shortages of qualified teachers and principals continue to weaken school improvement efforts. Conflicts with the teachers' union over site-based hiring and other issues loom down the road. Further, veteran reformers worry that Vallas' blizzard of initiatives will inevitably lead to "reform overload" and unfulfilled promises for change.

Thus far, though, CEO Vallas has been well received in the city. Advocacy groups are relieved that he as-

serted public authority ("I like public service" he announced when he was appointed) by shrinking the influence of for-profit firms. The teachers' union has warmed to his crackdown on student disciplinary infractions, his emphasis on facilities' improvement, and his push for a more uniform curriculum. Political and business leaders value his financial expertise. His down-to-earth can-do spirit and his energetic efforts to go to schools and to meet with community groups have won praise across the city. Many teachers and community leaders are cautiously expectant. As an August 25th *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial put it, "the moment is indeed ripe. Mr. Vallas' mix of optimism, expertise and eagerness for internal reform is changing for the better the long-contentious conversation over city schools."

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